

# The Coming Together Festival of Red-Black History & Culture

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The very first Coming Together Festival was held in the front yard of our home on the second Saturday in August of 1999.

There are several reasons for that.

- My husband Hugh had recently learned that the first Africans brought forcibly into a British colony in North America had been settled on Weyanoke Indian land in what is now Charles City County, where we were living. I had seen Weyanoke referred to as the first African settlement in North America, but didn't know where it was.
- Nobody we talked to after that, including relatives in Charles City, was familiar with that bit of information.
- Summer was coming, and with it the August 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of those "20 and odd" Africans, later discovered to be from Angola.
- We knew that most of our family and friends had traceable Native ancestry, but nobody talked about it.
- Hugh couldn't let the subject rest. He thought it was too important to ignore.
- We had a big yard.

We spread the word, invited some people to share what they knew, cooked some food, and kept doing it every year. (After that it became a potluck.) There are folks around who still remember the first one.

The point was that despite early and sustained government efforts to keep the two peoples separate, out of fear that they would conspire against their common oppressor, it was too late. There were already too many connections.

No matter what anyone else wanted to believe, red & black was a natural combination. There is a long list of similarities in the history and culture. Here are some of the parallels that Deborah Tucker, a librarian and researcher at Wayne State University, found in her research that explain why this was so:

- Both groups experienced forced removal, Africans from their continent and Indians from their territories in the East.
- Both were enslaved, and enslaved together, by the British settlers.
- Indians experienced colonialism, social disorder and removal for more than five hundred years, and Africans endured the same thing on this continent for over four hundred years.
- Both groups were called savages.
- Both groups were forced into a three-way, culturally degrading situation that forced immense and intense cultural interaction, so that the European could take the Red man's land, and use the Black man's labor to work that land, without paying for either.
- Both groups had strong oral traditions for record keeping purposes, for remembering family ancestry, and for instruction -- storytelling traditions that both entertain and inform, as well as oral traditions for the development of helping and listening skills.
- Both groups have similar powerful cultural traditions, especially concerning birth and death.
- Both groups had strong spiritual traditions, with rituals and ceremonies that were an integral part of daily life. Indians felt the "Great Spirit" as a spiritual theme, while Blacks' survival of slavery was based around the church. The holy men had the positions of highest esteem, and they were a link between the people and the spirits. And most of them, Black and Indian, had healing and clairvoyant powers.

- The musical component was strong in both groups' ceremonies. When the drum was taken away from enslaved Africans, they resorted to tapping out their messages, and thereby developed tap dancing.
- Dance was a major part of the ceremonies and cultural expression of both groups.
- Both the Red and the Black cultures included strong traditions of medicine men and the use of natural medicinal herbs. Some of these medical skills have come down to us as home-remedies, based on North-American plants and herbs.
- Both groups insisted on holding on to their culture and customs, resisting acculturation as long as possible.
- Both were forced to collaborate, and practiced "conflict resolution" long before it became a popular term in mainstream American society.
- Both had tribes among them who believed that warfare was a noble pursuit.
- When they were allowed to be educated, both groups were often educated together. For example, more than 1,380 Indians from 55 different tribes attended Hampton Institute in Virginia between 1883 and 1902.

We, as Red-Black people, are living proof of a relationship of long standing. It is up to us to know the truth about our history and culture, and to share it with others.

That is why we hold the Coming Together Festival every year.